BOOK REVIEW

BERLIN, ELOIS ANN and BRENT BERLIN. 1996. **Medical Ethnobiology of the Highland Maya of Chiapas, Mexico.** (0-691—03741-8, cloth). Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. $85.00. 557 pp.

The Tzeltal and Tzotzil Maya in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico have been in the forefront of paradigm development as the interdisciplinary field of ethnobiology matures. Contributions to understanding the principles of classification and taxonomy made through the systematic study of these indigenous peoples has probably accomplished more than all systematic lists of useful plants and animals published since Castetter defined the field. The authors and collaborators document a system of traditional knowledge based on years of explicit empirical experimentation about the effects of herbal remedies on body function. The authors provide an ethnomedical characterization of gastrointestinal conditions recognized by these highland Maya and describe existing evidence on the pharmacological activity of thirty-four medicinal plant species used to treat gastrointestinal diseases by the highland Maya. The authors claim that existing evidence on the pharmacological activity of plant species used in the treatment of gastrointestinal ailments of the Highland Maya supports the notion that these indigenous people have a scientific basis for traditional medicine possessing well-developed therapeutic efficacy.

The authors have gone to great lengths to document the cultural understanding of illness including cause, treatment and prognosis and is surely the most thoroughly researched ethnomedical characterization of gastrointestinal illness to date. The thoroughness of ethnomedical research on each of three major gastrointestinal conditions—diarrheas, abdominal pains and worms—is complemented by description of the documented biological activities of the principal medicinal plants used to treat each gastrointestinal affliction. Details of known biological activities of thirty-eight species comprising the "basic medicine kit" (el cuadro básico) is supplemented with an evaluation of an additional fifty-seven species used in admixtures with the basic medicine kit. Evaluation of a subset of the plant species used in admixtures further support to the idea that these indigenous people possess a sophisticated understanding of complementary or intensifying nature of biological activities of the admixtures used in treating gastrointestinal conditions among the highland Maya.

This book marks the maturation of ethnobiological inquiry in which attention is focused as much on demonstrating the scientific basis of indigenous health care as on documenting efficacy of traditional treatment of illness. In the context of growing interest in self-determination among indigenous groups and sovereign rights over knowledge about use of biological diversity, this books goes further than any other in demonstrating how academic research can also satisfy local community interests and needs. This information-packed volume should be on the bookshelf of all who would consider biological prospecting in forests possessed by indigenous societies because it provides a benchmark method that can help to empower local communities to assume responsibility in the conservation of biological and cultural heritage.—*Bruce Benz.*

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